DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 068 HE 024 878

AUTHOR Barkhymer, Meg; Dorsett, Yvonne
TITLE Institutional, Situational and Dispositional Obstacles Encountered by the Re-entry Graduate Woman.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Tests/Evaluation Instruments (160)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; Females; *Graduate Study; Higher Education; Perception; *Reentry Students; *Student Adjustment; Student Attitudes; Surveys; *Womens Education
IDENTIFIERS Bowling Green State University OH

ABSTRACT

Women who enter college after a significant interruption in their education often face obstacles or barriers that affect their success. These obstacles are typically classified into one of three categories: institutional barriers, situational barriers, or dispositional barriers. This study, conducted with 47 graduate women with a mean age of 34.7 years at Bowling Green University (Bowling Green, Ohio), examined the perceptions of re-entry women with respect to obstacles to their education. The results indicated that graduate women experience the same types of obstacles as undergraduate women, despite characteristically higher levels of skill and experience in education. The obstacles of greatest concern to the women surveyed included scheduling conflicts between college classes and job/family duties, the financial burden, guilt surrounding neglected parental and family responsibilities, and self-imposed pressure to excel academically. Appendices contain the survey instrument and a demographic questionnaire. Contains 23 references. (GLR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

HE

ED337068

Institutional, Situational and Dispositional Obstacles Encountered by the Re-entry Graduate Woman

Meg Barkhymer and Yvonne Dorsett
Department of Higher Education and Student Affairs
Bowling Green State University

Running head: OBSTACLES FOR RE-ENTRY GRADUATE WOMEN

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

HE 024 878

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Meg Barkhymer

Yvonne Dorsett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

2

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

Women who enter college for the first time after a significant interruption in their education often face obstacles or barriers which affect their success as students. These obstacles have been well documented through research on returning undergraduate women and are typically classified into one of three categories: institutional barriers, situational barriers or dispositional barriers. This study examined the perceptions of re-entry women in graduate school regarding similar obstacles to their education. The results of a survey specifically developed for this study indicated that graduate women experience the same types of obstacles as undergraduate women, despite characteristically higher levels of skill and experience in education. The obstacles of greatest concern to the women surveyed included scheduling conflicts between college classes and job and family duties, the financial burden caused by their education, guilt surrounding neglected parental and family responsibilities and self-imposed pressure to excel academically.

Institutional, Situational and Dispositional Obstacles Encountered by the Re-entry Graduate Woman

Women students constitute a majority on today's college campuses. Over forty percent of these women are age twenty-five or over (Chater, 1991). Women over thirty-five represent the fastest growing group; their numbers tripled between1972 and 1985 (Touchton, 1991) . Many of these women are returning to graduate school, often after a significant interruption in their education. They are a diverse group, bringing with them a wealth of experience, maturity and knowledge. However, they also come with a unique set of expectations and needs. Because they are juggling the many roles of adulthood, they frequently encounter obstacles upon reentry to higher education which negatively affect their lives as students. If higher education is to fully tap the tremendous potential of this growing population, it will be necessary for institutions to acknowledge these obstacles and develop new goals, policies and support programs to better serve women's needs (Holliday, 1985).

The subjects of existing studies in this area have generally been women pursuing an undergraduate education. Occasional studies have reported findings based on the total population of returning women, but none have focused specifically on the needs of returning graduate women. The purpose of this pilot study was to determine whether graduate women perceive obstacles to their education that are similar to those which have been well documented for undergraduate women, and to identify those obstacles they perceive to be the most serious barriers to their educational progress.

The emergence of the mature woman student in the past two decades has generated a growing body of research which has explored

the motivation and characteristics of this population and has identifed specific factors, typically labeled "barriers" in the literature, which hinder a woman's decision to return to school or function effectively as a student (Astin, 1976; Benjamin, 1979; Tittle, 1980; Cross, 1981; Saslaw, 1981; Holliday, 1985; Glass, 1987). Preliminary research in the 1970's focused on the "re-entry woman," typically described as a woman whose family had matured and was returning to college for career development or a search for an identity (Astin, 1976; Brandenburg, 1974).

As early as 1972, Ekstrom had examined women's participation in postsecondary education with the purpose of defining factors which might prevent them from entering or persevering in higher education. He divided the barriers he identified into three categories which have become standard in subsequent studies (Lourie, 1977; Cross, 1981; Glass, 1983; Wheaton, 1983). The first category of barriers, which he described as "institutional," relates to how institutions respond to the special needs of returning women students, and includes such factors as inadequate financial aid, discriminatory admissions policies and inadequate information dissemination. The second category, "situational" barriers, refers to role expectations imposed by family and society which affect a woman's performance and well-being as a student and include such factors as adequate transportation and childcare and work/school schedule conflicts.

The third category, personal or "dispositional" barriers, involves those psychological factors surrounding a woman's concept of herself and her world that affect her academic success. Self-confidence, dependency and assertiveness are examples of these. The issue of personal barriers has received much attention in the literature. The growing interest in the study of human development has resulted in increased awareness of a life span perspective regarding adult growth. This perspective introduces a number of issues relevant to the returning

woman student. Among these are identity-integrity conflicts (Letchworth, 1977), changing roles of self and self in regards to family (Sheehey, 1977), and an awareness of time limitations (Neugarten, 1968). Any of these developmental issues might be pertinent to the lives of many returning women and contribute to the pressures and stresses they feel as college students.

While the early literature attempted to describe the "typical" re-entry woman, more recent studies have identified several distinct subgroups: 1) working women who are single or married and childless and who are returning to school to enhance their already existing skills; 2) working women with families who return with a specific vocational goal in mind; 3) family women who had discontinued their education in order to become homemakers and are reentering school to finish or advance their degree (Johnson, Wallace & Sedlacek, 1983). A fourth group is also frequently included: women who have experienced a life-changing event such as a divorce or death of a spouse. Divorce, in act, has been the reason most often cited by women for returning to school (Kahnweiler, 1980). Each of these categories was represented by the participants in this study.

As previously stated, the literature devoted to these issues is based on studies conducted almost exclusively with undergraduate women students. These studies have generally described women in search of identity, who have new, outwardly directed goals and who are actively assimilating a new experience (Holliday, 1985). The research rarely includes studies of women who have already achieved high levels of skill, have experience in higher education and who are seeking a graduate education to enhance existing skills or pursue a second career. Related studies that have focused specifically on graduate students generally involved measuring stressful effects of advanced academic training in professional areas such as medicine, law and business (Smith, 1985; Stansbury, 1986; Namir, 1982);

however, they do not address the broader issues discussed above. This pilot study is a preliminary attempt to fill that void.

Method

Subjects

The selected target population for this study was graduate women twenty-five years or older. The research was conducted at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. The city of Bowling Green lies in the rural northwest section of the state, with a population of 27,000. The population at Bowling Green State University consists of 18,040 students, including 2,310 graduate students, of which 1,258 are women.

Time restraints of the six weeks summer session, during which time this study was conducted, realistically precluded sampling 10% of the graduate women population. Therefore, an exploratory study was deemed appropriate. The forty participants were derived from four graduate education classes. A total of forty-nine surveys were distributed. Forty-seven students completed the survey for a response rate of 96%.

The mean age of the respondents was 34.7 years. The mean time period between completing undergraduate work and entering graduate school was 7.4 years, and the median number of graduate semester hours completed was twenty-two. Additional demographic information describing the sample is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Instrument

The Obstacle Scale for Re-entry Graduate Women (see Appendix A) was the measuring instrument specifically developed for this study.

The scale consists of 18 items that reflected concerns of women in graduate school. The students were instructed to respond to each item with one of the following degrees of concern: 1) very low degree, 2) low degree, 3) moderate degree, 4) high degree, and 5) very high degree. The scale was developed to measure obstacles on three dimensions identified as: 1) situational, 2) institutional, and 3) dispositional. Two open-ended questions were added to the scale. Number 19 asked students to identify any concern not listed by the scale, and number 20 asked each student to identify the obstacle that caused the greatest concern.

The graduate respondents were asked to provide personal demographic information that related to their age, relationship status, number and age of children living at home, employment status, and the time period between undergraduate degree and return to graduate school (see Appendix B). Students were not asked to provide any identifying information so that confidentiality could be maintained.

Content validity was supported by a panel of experts, one woman professor who works primarily with graduate women and two graduate women students, who positively reviewed the survey for item and sample validity analysis. Reliability of the three dimension categories was checked by having a graduate intern independently sort items into the three dimensions. The intern was able to correctly identify and place 100% of the response items into the dimensions chosen by the researchers.

Procedure

On July 17, 1991, having obtained permission from the instructors of the four conveniently selected classes, the researchers explained the nature and purpose of the study to the students, and the instrument was distributed. Participants were assured that a summary of the findings would be made available if requested, and that confidentiality would be maintained. The students were asked to return the instrument the following day or at their earliest convenience. The reponse to the survey was positive and 96% of the surveys were returned.

Results

The survey results revealed that the obstacles that graduate women perceive as negatively affecting their educational progress are very similar to those documented by undergraduate women. The percentages of the responses corresponding to each item on the Obstacle Scale are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

In terms of number of responses, the Institutional Obstacles category received a slightly higher total number of responses to items of high concern than the other categories. Eighty-four responses of "high" or "very high" concern were selected in the Institutional Obstacles category. Seventy-eight "high/very high" responses were indicated in the Situational Obstacle category and sixty-nine in the Dispositional Obstacle category. These responses revealed fairly balanced levels of concern distributed between the three dimensions.

The situational obstacle of greatest concern was #1 (total cost of financing education), with 63% of the respondents indicating a "high/very high" level of concern. The items of greatest concern in the institutional obstacle category were #5 (scheduling conflicts with job or home), chosen by 56% of the survey respondents, and #11 (frustrating institutional red tape), chosen by 51%. Item #15 (too much self pressure to make "A's"), in the dispositional category, was indicated as a "high/very high" concern for 65% of the respondents. This obstacle received the highest overall percentage of "high/very high" ratings on the Obstacle scale.

Each respondent was asked to choose the one item of greatest concern to them from those items listed on the scale. All items except

numbers 3, 10, 13 and 16 were selected at least once. Three items, one from each category, were chosen most often: #4 (job requirements leave little time for study), #5 (scheduling conflicts with job or home) and #18 (feel guilty about leaving family to cope), receiving five, six and five responses respectively. Again, this indicated that high levels of concern were distributed evenly between the three dimensions.

The six responses to the open-ended question #19 (which instructed respondents to list additional obstacles not already indicated) were simply variations of the items already listed. This seemed to affirm the validity of the instrument.

Four items were identified as having very low levels of concern for this group of respondents. Three of these items were in the situational obstacle category: quality of child care, adequate transportation and level of family support. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated very low levels of concern in these areas, figures which undoubtedly reflect the socioeconomic status of the responding group. Another item of low concern was #3 (too old to compete with younger students), with fifty-eight percent indicating very low concern.

Discussion

The outcomes of this exploratory study must be evaluated within the context of its limitations as a result of the selection procedures and size of the sample. Although the results obtained from this study confirm the hypothesis that returning women students in graduate school experience the same obstacles as undergraduate women, further research is required to validate the nature and scope of the identified obstacles. Additional studies, such as an examination into the reasons women put extreme pressure on themselves to make "A's," would be useful to provide insights into the dispositional factors that cause returning women students to experience high levels of stress in academic areas.

Institutions may find the tentative results useful in evaluating current procedures and programs, and/or creating new procedures and programs

that respond to obstacles that generate significant concern for re-entry graduate women. For example, graduate support groups and orientation programs could be used as effective forums to stimulate awareness about obstacles that challenge smooth entry and progress through the graduate program, and to help students become familiar with the services and personnel available to them. These experiences would enable women to anticipate and understand potential obstacles and share their concerns and helpful experiences with others in order to enhance coping strategies and skills. Additional seminars in stress management, assertiveness, time management and crisis management could increase a returning woman's ability to cope with her many conflicting roles and responsibilities.

Institutions might also tailor services to the needs of returning women by increasing scheduling and course options, streamlining standard procedures, developing new sources of financial aid for re-entry women and improving dissemination of campus information to this population. In this way, institutions can provide a more supportive, less challenging environment that will allow graduate women to focus their energies positively toward their graduate education experience.

References

Astin, Helen. (1976). Adult development and education. In Helen Astin (Ed.), Some action of her own: the adult woman and higher education. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Benjamin, Esther. (1979). Barriers to academic re-entry women and how to overcome them. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Program on Women. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 185 935).

Brandenburg, J. B. (1974). The needs of women returning to school. Personnel and Guidance Journal, 53, 11-18.

Chater, Shirley, & Hatch, Ann. (1991). Student, worker, mom: on campus in need. Educational Record, 72, (1), 32-37.

Cross, Patricia. (1981). Adults as learners. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Ekstrom, R. B. (1972). Barriers to women's participation in post-secondary education, a review of the literature. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 072 368).

Glass, J. Conrad & Rose, Anita R. (1987). Re-entry women: A growing and unique population. Journal of National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 25, (2), 110-119.

Holliday, Gay. (1985). Addressing the concerns of returning women students. In Nancy J. Evans (Ed.), New directions for student services, Facilitating the development of women. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Johnson, D.H., Wallace, K.W., & Sedlacek, W. E. (1979). A comparison of the needs of returning and traditional students by sex. Journal of the National Associationof Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors, 42 .14-1.

Kahnweiler, Jennifer, & Johnson, Patricia. (1980). A midlife developmental profile of the returning woman student. Journal of College Student Personnel, 21, (5), 414-418.

Letchworth, George E. (1970). Women who return to college: An identity-integrity approach. Journal of College Student Personnel, 11, (2), 103-106.

Lourie, Joan, & Mayo, Cynthia. (1977). Re-entry: An analysis of the needs and problems of the returning college student. Master's thesis, University of North Carolina, Charlotte, NC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 151 716).

Molstad, S.M. (1984). Re-entry women: extending an invitation. Journal of the National Association of Women Deans, Administrators and Counselors, 47, (2), 37-39.

Moore, Wanda. (1985). Barriers non-traditional women encounter as they seek entrance to four year colleges and universities. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 277 332).

Namir, Shelia. (1982). Stresses associated with a major life transition. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 225 450)

Neugarten, B. (1968). Middle age and aging. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Saslaw, Rita. (1981). The new student for the eighties: the mature woman. Educational Horizons, 60, (1), 41-46.

Sheehy, Gail. (1976). Passages: predictable crises of adulthood. New York: E.P.Dutton.

Smith, M. & Shelton, M. (1985). A comparison of graduate and professional students: Their daily stressors. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 264 797).

Stansbury, Kendyll. (1986, April). The relationship of the supportiveness of the academic environment to the self confidence and assertiveness in academic work for men and women graduate students in science and engineering. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Tittle, Carol K. & Denker, Elenor R. (1980). Returning women students in higher education: Defining policy issues. New York: Praeger Publishers.

Touchton, Judith & Davies, Lynne (Eds.). (1991). Fact book on women in higher education. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, Macmillan Publishing Company.

Wheaton, Janilee B. & Robinson, Daniel. (1983). Responding to the needs of re-entry women: a comprehensive model. National Association of Student Personnel Administrator's Journal, 21, (2), 44-51.

Appendix A

Obstacle Scale for Re-entry Graduate Women

Directions: Listed below are obstacles faced by women in higher education. Rate each item according to its degree of concern for you.

5 = Very High Degree
4 = High Degree
3 = Moderate Degree
2 = Low Degree
1 = Very Low Degree

---

1 - total cost including fees, books, gas, child care, other	1	2	3	4	5
2 - program timetable for completion too demanding	1	2	3	4	5
3 - too old to compete with young students	1	2	3	4	5
4 - job requirements leave little time for study	1	2	3	4	5
5 - scheduling conflicts with job or home	1	2	3	4	5
6 - insufficient energy level	1	2	3	4	5
7 - home responsibilities leave little time for study	1	2	3	4	5
8 - information regarding campus resources not easily accessible	1	2	3	4	5
9 - tired of student role, classroom expectations	1	2	3	4	5
10 - unreliable or nonexistent child care	1	2	3	4	5
11 - frustrating institutional red tape	1	2	3	4	5
12 - learning new technical/computer skills	1	2	3	4	5
13 - unreliable or nonexistent transportation	1	2	3	4	5
14 - feel unsafe on campus at night	1	2	3	4	5
15 - too much self-pressure to make "A's"	1	2	3	4	5

16 - lack of support by family 1 2 3 4 5

17 - press for grades rather than learning by institution 1 2 3 4 5

18 - feel guilty leaving family to cope 1 2 3 4 5

19 - Please indicate any obstacle of concern to you that was not listed above. _____

_____

20 - Please indicate which **single** obstacle represents your greatest concern by circling the item response number.

Please go on to the next page.

Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

Directions: Please circle or complete the following responses that apply to you.

Social Security Number _____

Relationship Status

Married Divorced Significant Other
Single Separated

Number of Children living at home _____

Ages of children living at home ___/___/___/___/___/___/___

Approximate number of graduate semester hours completed _____

Education Level of Spouse

H.S. Bachelor's
1-2 years Bachelor's Plus

Reasons for Attending Graduate School

Career Change
Love of Learning
Change in Life Situation
Keep up with Competition
Opportunity for Advancement
Required by Some Authority
Other Not Listed _____

Age _____

Employment Status

Full Time Part Time None

Period of time between undergraduate degree and entering graduate school _____

TABLE 1

Description of the Sample in Terms of Demographic Variables

Characteristics	N	Percent
Relationship Status		
Married	28	70.0%
Single	8	20.0%
Divorced	1	.025%
Separated	1	.025%
Significant Other	2	.05%
Number of Children at Home		
0 Children	18	45.0%
1 Child	5	12.5%
2 Children	11	27.5%
3 Children	4	10.0%
4 Children	1	.025%
5 Children	1	.025%
Age of Children at Home		
1-5	3	6.2%
6-10	15	31.3%
11-15	21	43.8%
16-20	9	18.8%
Education Level of Spouse		
H.S.	5	16,7%
H.S. + 1-2 years	6	20.0%
Bachelor's	7	23.3%
Bachelor's plus	12	40.0%
Reasons for Attending Graduate School		
Career Change	13	32.5%
Love of Learning	16	40.0%
Change in Life Situation	7	17.5%
Keep Up With Competition	4	10.0%
Opportunity for Advancement	19	47.5%
Required by Some Authority	6	15.0%
Other		
Status	1	.025%
Escape	1	.025%
Employment Status		
Full-time	25	62.5%
Part-time	11	27.5%
None	4	10.0%

TABLE 2

Judgment of Obstacles for Re-entry Graduate Women

Obstacles and Item Number		Percent Response					
Degree of Concern		1 (very low)	2	3	4	5 (very high)	4+5
Situational Obstacles							
1	total cost including fees, books, gas, child care, other	8	13	18	43	20	63
4	job requirements leave little time for study	10	5	38	28	20	48
7	home responsibilities leave little time for study	20	18	28	25	10	35
10	unreliable or nonexistent child care	60	13	15	10	3	13
13	unreliable or nonexistent transportation	60	18	18	3	3	06
16	lack of support by family	60	23	8	10	0	10
Institutional Obstacles							
2	program timetable for completion too demanding	18	20	38	20	5	25
5	scheduling conflicts with job or home	18	5	23	33	23	56
8	information regarding campus resources not easily accessible	28	23	18	25	8	33
11	frustrating institutional red tape	10	25	13	23	28	51
14	feel unsafe on campus at night	43	18	18	15	5	20
17	press for grades rather than learning by institution	25	33	15	13	13	26
Dispositional Obstacles							
3	too old to compete with young students	58	15	15	5	8	13
6	insufficient energy level	13	28	28	13	20	33
9	tired of student role, classroom expectations	20	35	23	13	10	23
12	learning new technical/computer skills	30	20	15	18	18	36
15	too much self-pressure to make "A's"	20	5	10	40	25	65
18	feel guilty leaving family to cope	30	20	23	13	15	28

Note: Percent rounding may cause summation to be greater than 100.